

Supporting a Place to Grow through Farm to School

There's something a little bit magical about summertime in Wisconsin. If you've ever stepped outside on the first warm morning of the year you might know that giddy feeling I'm talking about.

Maybe it has to do with the fact that we spend many long months of the year watching the snow bury the dirt and the thermometer hover stubbornly over single digit numbers. Maybe it's the fact that gardeners and farmers around the state have spent much of those long, cold months dreaming up their next summer's garden: pouring over seed catalogs, drawing diagrams, investing in new tools. By the time March rolls around, the anticipation of warmer days is almost too much to bear. You might even see an impatient gardener (like myself) crossing their fingers as they daringly drop sugar snap peas into the soil, ignoring the snow still on the ground. When at last the landscape finally turns green again, and seeds begin to sprout from the earth, the excitement is contagious.

The next four months are a blur of frenzied efforts to cultivate the garden, the feeling of hot sunshine on your back as you water and weed, and then, of course, the sweet victory of harvesting the food that you've worked so hard to grow. Knowing the joy of growing food is an experience I wish that every person could know. Over the past several months, this has been a central goal of the Farm to School program in Oregon: Give as many students as possible the opportunity to experience a joyful summer through growing, tasting, and learning about the rich variety of foods that we can grow locally here in Wisconsin.



Oregon School Nutrition Director Sarah Tomaszewicz purchases green and gold beans to serve students on a Farmers Market Thursday.

At the beginning of June, the Oregon School District started 'Farmers Market Thursdays' as part of the Summer Meals program. The program served up to 450 meals each day and is completely free for families to participate in. Each week, the nutrition team and I attended either the Oregon Farmers Market or Dane County Farmers Market to shop for something fresh and delicious to serve up for lunch on Thursdays. Our market missions were always exciting: Though we usually arrived with a plan, we didn't always know exactly what we would end up with. On many trips, our eyes would be drawn to some unexpected rainbow-hued tomatoes, unbelievably orange carrots, or beautiful crunchy green beans. In those cases, we left our plans behind, and let the seasonality of the market be our guide.

During the market trips, I enjoyed talking with the producers and asking questions about their farm and about their thoughts on food and the environment. Building Farm to School partnerships is a lot like building friendships in some ways: learning to listen and appreciate the efforts of each other. Through a weekly activity sheet with quotes from the producers, I tried to capture the essence of being at the market for the students, so they too could feel connected to the producers who made their meal.



Students harvest dill and accomplish other garden chores at the Brooklyn Elementary School garden during the Farm to School summer class.

Another magical moment of the summer was the Farm to School gardening class we hosted over two weeks in July. Every morning, seventeen young gardeners met together to share their interest in growing food. Some of us had already spent time in a garden before, while many others were experiencing it for the first time. It was inspiring to watch each student grow and transform over the course of two weeks. Those who had shied away from getting their hands dirty on the first day were bravely investigating the worms, bees, and other critters of the garden by the end. After two weeks spent caring for the garden together, I realized that each student had developed a strong sense of accomplishment and belonging there. The space had become their own. Watching the students diligently harvesting green beans off the bush just to share a fresh snack with their classmates reminded me of a garden's true purpose: A place to grow food, and a place to grow together as a community.

On our final day of class, the students hosted a mock farmers market for their friends and family to attend. We harvested as much as we could from the garden, created beautiful bouquets and posters, and practiced explaining the different foods to others so that they might be inclined to 'buy' from our stand. Everything at the market was cost-free for the visitors to take home to their kitchens. Needless to say, we sold out!



Top: *A student arranges tomatoes harvested from the garden in preparation for the market.*

Bottom: *Students share their knowledge of food with visitors at the market.*

Serving the Oregon community as an AmeriCorps member has helped make a strange year into a beautiful one for me. As we arrive at the start of a new school year, which many of us hope will be more 'normal' than the last, I am taking time to reflect on the lessons an 'abnormal' year has left us with. Just as in the garden, patience, perseverance, and flexibility are critical as we navigate the pandemic. Wherever the wind blows us this fall, I am confident knowing that there is still great joy to be found whenever communities come together over growing and eating local foods.